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FEATURES

# Library offers creative programming for youth



Nellie Doneva/Reporter-News Children play Minecraft on laptops at the main branch of the Abilene Public Library. A Minecraft-related art activity was also available for people who had to wait for their turn on the computer.

By [Brian Bethel](#) of the Abilene Reporter News

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At the Abilene Public Library, superheroes square off through the strength of street knowledge.

Imitating the popular YouTube phenomenon Epic Rap Battles of History, participants in the library's Collecting Commas Writing Club take on the personas of characters from Marvel and DC Comics, such as Wonder Woman, Black Widow, Thor and

Superman, slamming on each other's superpowers in a vicious — but scrubbed-up for teen time — war of rhythmic, rhyming couplets.

And earlier in the week, a couple dozen kids and teens waited for a turn to play the popular world-building video game Minecraft. The electronic Lego-like block game encourages creativity, preplanning and resource management, all in a package that adds up to genuine fun.

Both are examples of the sort of innovative and fun programming for children and teens offered through the library, said Kelsie Wade, children's librarian for the APL system.

Wade said that staples of the library's traditional programming — including good, old-fashioned book-reading — remain intact.

"We definitely like people to check out books, and we like to tie our programs into the materials we offer," she said.

But libraries are going through substantial changes in the digital age, she said, reflected in both their offerings — kids and teens are seeking more electronic books and digital audiobooks, among other resources — and programs.

"The thing about libraries nowadays is — while we want (children) to check out books and have a love of reading — they're also just becoming community centers," Wade said. "A lot of people are saying libraries are dying, but that's not true. Libraries are merely changing."

And the change produces a good deal of fun for the young people involved.

The library system attempts to offer programs for the very young all the way up to teens and young adults, from a "Baby Steps"

storytime for infants and parents to more standard summer reading clubs to Lib-Con, a yearly sort of mini-Comic-Con put on by the library.

Younger children tend to gravitate toward arts and crafts, Wade said, as well as storytime programs, offered almost every day of the week at all three branches. "Family Fun" opportunities are designed to appeal to a wide range of ages, with stories, games and crafts.

Many times siblings will come to such programs, she said, with everyone able to find something they enjoy.

When it comes to teens and tweens, programs include but move beyond just education to offering a safe place where they can go without fear of getting in trouble or being judged, Wade said.

"They can be who they are because more than likely there is someone here who is like them," she said. "That's incredibly important for teens and tweens as they figure out who they are in the world and what they want to do."

Traditional fare, such as book clubs or craft nights, don't set as well with teens as they used to, Wade said.

And many teens are so busy with school or extracurricular activities that they really only want to do things they know they really like, she said.

So in most cases, figuring out what's popular and capitalizing on it is vital.

"When we hit tween and teen age, we definitely try to hit all the nerdy, geeky popular stuff," she said.

That's where things like Lib-Con or the Minecraft program come

in, she said.

In the latter case, the popular multiplayer game appeals to tweens, teens and even adults.

A Lego program has attracted a number of boys, who are "notoriously hard to get into the library," Wade said, while a club devoted to the art of Japanese animation, aka anime, also has enjoyed a strong attendance.

Librarians regularly watch what teens are checking out, what types of media they're reading, and even what they're wearing, she said.

If younger people are regularly wearing shirts depicting movie, television or gaming characters, that's a good clue as to what's actually popular here, Wade said.

"If you're wearing a nerdy T-shirt, we know to tell you that you should come to this or that program," she said.

Generally, children's programming is consistently strong, Wade said, among all three branches of the library.

"Our story times are incredibly well-attended," she said, as are "Family Fun" activities. In December, for example, the library held a Polar Express-themed Family Fun time attended by roughly 50 children.

That's fairly good attendance for a single event, she said, a more typical "Family Fun" day being around 20, plus about 12 parents.

Some activity is seasonal. A "summer camp" held at the South Branch had 90 participants attending regularly.

"Those are amazing numbers," Wade said.

Storytimes attract anywhere from 15 to 45 participants on a regular day, at least at the main library, she said.

The important thing about children's programming is that there is a constantly-renewing pool for it, Wade said.

"When one group of kids moves on, the next comes in," she said.

The library struggles with "tween" programs, especially at its main branch, Wade said. At a recent "tween time," only six participants showed up.

"The sad thing is that six is really good for us," Wade said.

Teen programs, now that the library system is pushing them more, are beginning to succeed more. Getting one teen attendee is equivalent to getting five younger children, she said, making an attendance of, for example, 10 at a recent anime program significant.

A regular writing club now has around a dozen regular kids, which is "mind boggling" attendance, she said, even though the club has had some ups and downs. For a while, Wade said she was only hosting four participants a month.

"But for the last five weeks, I've had double digits," she said.

The upcoming expansion of the South Branch of the library into the Mall of Abilene should be a boon, Wade said. The current South Branch, on Danville Drive, is "running out of space for books, for DVDs, as well as for their patrons," Wade said.

"Trying to cram 90 kids into the tiny space they have in the back, that's ... interesting," she said, noting the mall move may help the library reach different demographics than they might otherwise.

Many teens think of the library as something "uncool," she said. But having it where they naturally hang out — and offering free programs — may be the key to enticing them to come in, then staying for other programs and opportunities.

And the future is full of possibilities, she said.

"Our world is becoming more and more focused on technology and digital services," she said. Teens and even younger children are becoming more interested in resources such as electronic books and electronic versions of audiobooks.

"So with this new technology, we're able to expand the library itself into a different direction," she said.

Programs will always come and go, Wade said, and one thing the library must always do is admit when something isn't working — or when an idea has run its course.

The library system had some programming focusing on playing games on the Nintendo Wii, a video game console with innovative motion controls.

But the Wii fell out of favor as it aged, and thus that programming was discontinued, Wade said.

"Talking to the patrons is probably the best way to see what's popular — what's your current favorite show, what is big in the world you want to do but no one is offering," Wade said. "We want to be able to try and fill that gap as best we can for all ages, children, teens and adults, by offering them things they can't get anywhere else or that we just make more fun than anywhere else."

### Finding the Fun

As far as current trends go, Minecraft is white-hot, with books,

games, figures and other paraphernalia accompanying the video game. A staple on YouTube, it's popular with all ages.

In the library's Minecraft group, those not playing cut out paper representations — a hobby in itself, dubbed "papercrafting" — of the pixel-laden blocks that represent the game's precious ores or in-game tools. They talk strategy or swap stories about things they've built in the game's sandbox of possibilities.

"It's kind of like digital Legos," said Marianne Vadney, library assistant for the South Branch. "It's about the ability to create things. And with kids so digitally driven, this is the world they live in. They live in a computer world."

There are few limitations to what creative kids — and adults — can make in the game, Vadney said. And there's even an educational aspect in the form of McraftEDU.com, with content made by teachers and librarians to challenge and enlighten young players.

Alexis Fabor, 12, was in love with Minecraft long before she came to play at the library.

"You play it for the first time, and you're just addicted to it," she said.

But playing it in the same room with others for the first time was a revelatory experience for her.

"It's cool because it's creative and it's just so much fun," she said, offering an enthusiastic "yes!" when asked by her grandmother, Linda Fabor, if she would like to come back.

"She was really excited because they had something for her age," Linda Fabor said, noting that Alexis had participated in past children's library programs.

Chimeria Gonzalez, there with sons Julian, 13, Gabriel, 11, and Christian, 5, was delighted with the opportunity for her children — all of whom love Minecraft — to play the game at the library.

"As a parent, I'm a gamer as well," Gonzalez said. "But I don't like them playing violent games. What I like about (Minecraft) is they can use engineering, they can use science, they can be creative. They can build whatever they want in this world."

She also appreciates the parental controls, something the library also uses to control potentially violent content or to help out players who are in a jam, Vadney said.

Julian Gonzalez said he loves to play with Redstone, one of the more valuable and versatile of Minecraft's many minerals. He constructs massive railroad stations and other wonders powered by the crimson-layered rock.

"I like using Redstone to make machines," he said. "I've actually made an attraction before where you can play this game, and after it opens up to another game, then it takes you on a big roller coaster."

Meanwhile, in another Comma Club-written skit, Sherlock Holmes finds himself in Lewis Carroll's Wonderland, the world's greatest detective confounded by inhabitants of the strange realm, perfect logic failing in the face of the Mad Hatter and Queen of Hearts. Among the many retorts: "If you're such a genius, why are letting your tea get cold?"

"You are all mad," the detective states flatly, a statement the Wonderland residents greet with enthusiasm.

Later, the young writers read through a round-robin tale detailing a post-apocalyptic world of ninja cats, magical cupcakes and



unicorn-butterfly hybrids.

Such exercises in creativity are meant to spark the imaginations of the would-be authors and poets, giving them a place to both unwind and share what they're feeling and what they're thinking, Wade said.

"Most of the time, I use prompts to try to steer them in a direction," she said, noting participants tend to write fantasy or murder mysteries more than not. A healthy dosage of "fan fiction," stories set within a popular pre-existing fictional universe, is regularly produced, as is poetry.

Most of the latter is "not that angsty," Wade said with a laugh, though on occasion the mantra of all youth, "you don't understand," holds sway.

"But usually, they're very happy," she said. "And their writing is sometimes very interesting. They're great."

Asked why they like the group, the writers, many of whom said they would like to write professionally one day, described a place where one could relax, be a bit geeky, and most importantly be themselves.

"It's a fun and energetic group," said Casey, one of the participants. "No one judges anyone for anything. It's a place to have fun."

And Collecting Commas is also a place to chase her dreams, she said.

"I've wanted to be an author since first grade, but I didn't know I had a talent in writing until sixth grade," she said. "And then my grandma recommended me to (the) writing club. I've actually written some stuff that's gotten some positive reviews. I love

words."

Members of Collecting Commas tend to hang out with each other after the club, get ice cream together and otherwise do activities as friends. Parents, too, often benefit from the experience of their children's programs, often finding friends and peers on their own.

"I don't even know if some of these kids would have met each other if not for the library," Wade said.

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